

22. DISCONNECTED OBSERVATIONS ON A SPECIES OF
SCOLAPENDRA

These disconnected observations and experiences are probably relevant to Lavkumar Khacher's note on a predatory centipede of the genus *Scolapendra* published in *JBNHS* Vol. 74 No. 1—in all cases, the same centipede is meant, thick-bodied and dorso-ventrally flattened and about 15-17 cm long, conspicuously banded chrome yellow and a bluish dark slate (almost a cold black) on the body and with scarlet-vermilion legs.

In the summer of 1947 I was playing a game of cards in the club-house in Sandur (now in the Bellary district of Karnataka) before dinner, when a particularly large banded centipede of this species emerged from the rolled up cricket-mat in a corner of the room. Everyone demanded its instant execution, saying it was a specially deadly reptile, and on my pointing out that no centipede was lethal to men and anyway none was a reptile, my friend, the late Mr. V. S. Lad, bet me five rupees that I dared not allow the brute to bite me. Removing my shoes, I approached the curled up centipede and prodded it with my toes to provoke it to bite, but this only made it run towards the cover of the cricket-mat, whereupon I pinned it down firmly by its middle with my great toe. It then turned back upon itself and firmly clasping the toe with its legs, bit me: I could feel the pain and prick not only of the bite but also of the clasp of the several pairs of legs. The centipede had to be killed to remove it from my great toe with no risk of laceration of the skin during the removal. I felt much irritation and some pain, and very soon the toe swelled up, so that I had to walk home that night carrying my shoes in my hand. The next day the toe was still swollen, painful and throbbing—no treatment, beyond bathing the

toe with soap and water, was given, so as to conform to the terms of the bet. I could not play in a cricket match that day because I could not pull on my boots. The bite was clearly visible, and I could feel, or imagine I felt, the places where the centipede had gripped my toe with its chitinous sharp legs, though these were not clearly visible. Mr. Lad did not pay the bet that day, as he prudently waited to see if any belated consequences would ensue, but on the third day, when the swelling subsided of its own accord, he paid up like a gentleman.

One morning, a good many years ago (the date and notes are not readily traceable, but I did make a note of it and my son, consulted 3 days ago, remembers the incident perfectly) my son and I were standing beneath the wood-apple tree in my backyard (one of the biggest in Madras) discussing a weed which had recently made its appearance there, when we saw a centipede of this species come out of the leaf litter on the ground. A large male bloodsucker (*Calotes versicolor*) which was up the tree's bole and well above us also saw the centipede, and rushed down the tree, actually leaping the last two feet down to the ground in its hurry, rushed up to the centipede and with no preliminaries swallowed it—the head and a quarter of the length were taken in at the first bite and the rest of the squirming, violently wriggling length of the prey swallowed in a few seconds, before that bloodsucker returned to the tree. I watched it for an hour afterwards, and it exhibited no signs of discomfort or even satiation, coming down again awhile later to seize and swallow a mole-cricket.

Three nights ago my cook, a nervous woman, called me down to deal with a large centipede

(also of the same kind) that had taken refuge in the bamboo basket (a little more than 2-foot across at its mouth and about 12 inches deep) she uses for conveying kitchen refuse to the municipal refuse-bin. The centipede had its head and tail inside the upside-down basket and about 2 in. of its middle section exposed on top: remembering past experience, I seized this middle section in a pair of long-nosed pliers and lifted the centipede out. To my surprise the entire basket came up, and I had to hold

the basket down with one hand to extract the centipede with the other, so powerful was the grip of its legs on the woven bamboo. Since I had injured it badly, I killed that centipede with a slap of my chappal, and in the process noticed that this species of centipede does not glow all over with a phosphorescent glow when so killed as the reddish brown centipede, slightly smaller and thinner and common in houses, does.

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September 23, 1977.

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23. A NOTE ON THE DISCOVERY OF THE MALE OF *ACRITOA*- *CHAETA DISTINCTA* MALL. (DIPTERA, MUSCIDAE)

Acritochaeta distincta (Syn. *Atherigona distincta* Mall.) was first collected from Guindy, Saidpet, S. India in 1909 by W. S. Patton and described by Malloch (1923). The author described the species from a series of 6 specimens. The holotype ♀ and 3 ♀♀ paratypes are deposited at the British Museum (Natural History). The male was not described. Subsequently, two further specimens of the female were taken from Calcutta in 1907 and 1915 and are also lodged in the British Museum.

In the course of work at ICRISAT at the break of the monsoon in 1976, when intensive surveys of shoot-flies present in local grasses and cultivated cereals were conducted using square pan water traps baited with fish meal, a very large number of an unusual *Acritochaeta* were attracted and caught. Most of the specimens were female, but males were also present. Specimens submitted to Mr. A. C. Pont at the British Museum were identified as *A. distincta*. The male of the species needs to be described at some future date.

Data from traps in the period mid-May to mid-July (20.5.76 to 17.7.76) showed that of a total of 2780 *Atherigona* and *Acritochaeta* specimens attracted to 20 traps sited at various representative locations at ICRISAT Research Centre, 313 were males. Of these males, 84% (266) were *Acritochaeta distincta*. Some 248 of these were all taken at one particular trap. Detailed investigation over the next 3 weeks confirmed these data in that in the period 18.vii.76 to 7.viii.76 of 8677 flies taken, 816 were males of which 80% were *A. distincta*. At this stage, whereas 554 males of the species were all recovered from one trap it was observed that traps at 3 other sites became productive. It was clear that traps in proximity to the palm, *Borassus flabellifer* L. (Palmae), were the productive ones. Investigation of rotting palm nuts revealed large numbers of eggs, larvae and pupae of *A. distincta*. These are as yet undescribed, but specimens have been lodged at the British Museum (NH) for inclusion in any revision of the genus carried out. The host